

CHRISTIAN STUDIES: ANACHRONISM OR SALVATION?

By Thomas Howard

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Dr. Howard delivered this presentation at Hillsdale during the launching of the College's Christian Studies Program.

Some time ago my wife and I were talking, as we tend to do from time to time. I remember only the following fragment from our conversation, but, judging from this fragment, the conversation must have been about doom and one thing and another, which conversations with me tend to be about. I remember saying to her that the thing I fear most in life is chaos: the breakdown of order, so that we are reduced to everyone screaming and clawing each other's eyes out in grocery stores, scrabbling for the last dirty celery leaves in the corner and the last wrinkled potato, and, finally, the last bits of chewing gum and ersatz butterscotch topping—anything to fend off starvation. Then starvation itself—especially for one's children. Lines of refugees, slogging along country roads, pushing wheelbarrows and rickshaws piled high with saucepans, rocking chairs, stuffed animals, and quilts



(why do refugees always have so many quilts, I am always asking myself). I have been looking and looking at pictures of refugees all my life—Belgians and Poles and Estonians when I was a little boy, then later Koreans and Pakistanis and Nigerians, then Somalis, then Vietnamese and Cambodians and Laotians, now Cubans. In these pictures there are always bedrolls and quilts everywhere. Why? Come to think of it, I suppose the reason is obvious, isn't it? What does life come down to, when we have been dispossessed? If we can only have a saucepan with, pray God, something to put in it, and a place to lay our heads, like the foxes in their holes. That is the last ditch. After that, you sit on the ground, hollow-eyed and ghost-like, and wait for death.

Anyway, I was visualizing all of this as a sort of final horror. When my wife got a chance to say something, she, because she is wise and because she is good, and because she is a woman and therefore sees more clearly

im•pri•mis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things).

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than I do, said that the thing she fears most in her imagination is having our children taken away forcibly and taught things that are monstrous and grotesque: Marxist doctrines of man, for example, and cruelty and cynicism, or the bitter, harsh, and sordid vision of life proclaimed so fiercely by prophets like Jane Fonda, Germaine Greer, and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

When she said this I realized that she had in fact touched on something that was, if possible, more frightening than the visions of horror I had conjured. But in what sense was it more frightening? After all, one can imagine one's children, lined up outside the commune dormitory in neat grey tunics, hair brushed, cheeks scrubbed, singing in a great chorus, "Onward and upward with *liberté, égalité, fraternité*," and, on cue from the matron in her tunic and epaulettes, raising their fists in the air with a shout of victorious scorn for God, mother, apple pie, and the Boy Scouts. What emancipation! They would be healthy, busy, and disciplined. Who could wish for more?

But Christ and all his holy angels defend us from the advent of this state of affairs.

Now at this point you may be murmuring to yourself or your neighbor, "What is going on? The man has got his cues wrong. He has pulled out the wrong speech. We asked him to make us a speech at the inauguration of an Institute for Christian Studies, and here we are two minutes into the thing, head over heels in wheelbarrows, proletarian communes, and paranoia. Come. Someone signal the chairman. We cannot go on like this."

But if you will hold off your signal to the chairman for a moment, I will try to explain why I have conjured these pictures. My reason is this: better hands than mine, including names familiar to this audience, such as Malcolm Muggeridge, Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, George Roche, William F. Buckley, and Russell Kirk, have given us astute analyses of what has happened in Western society in the last two hundred years, and what we may expect in the coming apocalyptic decades. I myself am a teacher and a father, and I very often find my mind running along lines that are co-terminous with our concerns here today.

Why inaugurate an Institute for Christian Studies? Why indeed? Are there not seminaries, Bible institutes, and Sunday Schools aplenty to do this job? Well, yes, there are numberless enterprises of that ilk. But where shall we find an institute in which the bold study of unabashed orthodox Christian tradition, including Scripture, history, theology, and the arts, is pursued in close proximity to the wider enterprise of Western thought, history, science, and humane letters? What I am describing is, of course, the notion upon which all of Western education was founded, from the school of Alcuin at the court of Charlemagne, right on through the foundations at Paris, Padua, Salamanca, Oxford, and Cambridge, to

Harvard and Yale. The difficulty now is that it is hard to find very clear and lively evidence in the curricula of these venerable institutions of the original notion.

Rather than speaking generally and theoretically in my comments here, since I am neither a theologian nor a historian, I thought I might, with your permission, cast my remarks in the form of a series of concerns that present themselves to me—to me as a teacher in an institution of liberal learning and as the father of children who are approaching their years of higher education.

What is it, finally, that I want my students, and my children, to know? Why does it matter so much to me that I be given the chance to teach them? Why do I recoil at the idea of their being handed over to the government for the shaping of their vision?

The answer is that I believe what St. Augustine and the Venerable Bede and St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Thomas More and Erasmus and Pascal and Cardinal Newman believed, that sanctity is the state toward which all educational enterprises ought to assist us, under Grace.

Sanctity? How did we get here so fast? Who is talking about sanctity?

But, on the Christian view, if it is not sanctity toward which we must move, on pain of our lives, then what is it? I may press the question on myself as well as on my students and my children: what do I think I want? Where am I headed?

There are numbers of answers, of course, and modern education beckons us in various directions. Money for example, or more euphemistically, prosperity. This is one obvious good, and which of us does not find this irresistible? Money does so many things. It opens exciting doors. It will help me get to know the people I need to get to know, and it will help me get the house I want, and the style of life I want, and it will educate my children and above all give me at least some security. With inflation and unemployment and peril of one sort and another looming upon us so frighteningly now, who is going to say that money is not an enormously attractive buffer between us and the ragged edge? It would seem to be one of the eminently legitimate motives for one's getting educated. After all, the best positions are open only to the best educated.

Or, secondly, fame. If plain money seems a bit crass, then there is this, the desire for which is the last infirmity of noble minds. The idea of being widely respected and sought after by all sorts of fascinating people and of being thought to be a fascinating person by everyone is wholly attractive. Who would not like to hear the phone ring and find out that it is NBC or *Time* magazine on the line wanting us for a prime-time talk show or a cover story? Why, the very thought of it makes us start preening and looking in the mirror.

Or the beautiful life. Since life is so harrying and

ambiguous these days, one may as well try to make it as amusing and dazzling as he can while it lasts. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow comes the crash or the bomb or the lab report with the dreaded news. The wish to have a bit of fun and to kick up one's heels on the brink of the abyss is not, of course, entirely pernicious. God defend us from the gaunt people who will spoil every jollity and every festivity by walking about with placards announcing the Trump of Doom. After all, the Teacher whom we particularly acknowledged in an Institute for Christian Studies assisted Himself in the merriment at Cana of Galilee by setting the party up to six fresh kegs after everyone had drunk quite enough, surely.

Or just plain security, stability, and peace. Heaven knows this is attractive. With the walls crumbling about our ears, and the economy collapsing, and oil disappearing, and energy and environment emerging as apocalyptic problems, and violence washing up to our very doorsteps—perhaps our greatest wish is for mere peace and security. One begins to appreciate once again some of those robust litanies they used to say in church, beseeching the protection of heaven against one threat or another. "From the fury of the Norsemen, good Lord deliver us," implored the Anglo-Saxons, and we might gloss this for our own purposes to read, "From the fury of the Persians." Or, "From ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggity beasties, and things that go bump in the night, good Lord, deliver us," prayed the Cornishmen, and we might add, "...things that go bump in the night or the day, like nuclear meltdown or muggers' black-jacks landing on our skulls."

Security, then, is a thing most earnestly to be longed for at any time in human history, and certainly in these days. Hence it might well siphon our attention away from the only thing (sanctity) that matters in the view of the Christian sages and doctors. Let us by all means bolt and bar the doors against contingency and peril. The irony here, of course, is that there are no bolts or bars that will hold that door against the final interloper, Death.

But it seems a bit much to regale us with the spectre of Death during a speech at the Inaugural of an Institute for Christian Studies. After all, this is a time of beginning, not of ending. But is not this the point? Will not such an institute endeavor to keep alive in its very curriculum such titanic considerations as the Four Last Things which loom so large in Christian tradition, and which a feebler post-Enlightenment academia huddles so successfully under the rug? At least two poets would not consider it odd that Death be mentioned on an occasion such as this. Dante would not blink an eye, and T. S. Eliot would no doubt murmur, "In my end is my beginning." If it is objected that this is a macabre note to strike, we may remember one of the salutary notions that kept the fathers and the doctors and the philosophers and divines hard at their work century after century. Some went so far as to have a skull grinning at them from a

shelf as they worked over their books and parchments. *Memento mori* was the idea. All serious scholarship, and certainly all Christian scholarship by definition, must have as its subject matter what we might call The Important Things. Many items bid for a place in this august curriculum, and money, fame, amusement, and security are strong bidders. But Death is the arbiter who, once for all, will sort out the bidders and hand the prize to Sanctity. If nothing else will get our attention, Death will. I heard an undergraduate not long ago say in an offhand way, "I'm not into the Christian thing this week." Well, lady, I thought to myself, then you had better send up a prayer to Zeus or Wotan, since you are going to need all the help you can get when the Fates get around to snipping the thread of your story."

My favorite set of last words are those of a mediaeval pope. "Wait! Wait!" he cried out on his deathbed. Who of us will not feel like saying that? Just give me a bit more time to get my act together. The students who land in my office during the ninth week of term wondering whether there might not be some arrangements we could make since somehow the preceding nine weeks seem to have gone by without their having thought much about the term paper that is due the next day and the examination next week: are we not all like this? I must confess that when I find myself in this scene I usually find my imagination travelling forward to the time when it is my turn to be hailed up in front of the Divine Tribunal by St. Michael the Archangel. Wait. Wait.

But this would seem to be straying from our topic. But once again, an Institute for Christian Studies will have as at least part of its mandate the keeping alive of the ancient tradition in which there arched over the whole enterprise of human life, including the academic, the firmament of the Ineffable. Creation. Evil. Redemption. Incarnation. Judgment. Felicity. Sanctity. Grace. These words named the huge categories at work in the minds of the men who founded Western institutions of learning. Does the curriculum of the modern university include all this? If not, is it the richer for the omission?

But to return to my earlier question as to what it is that I would like my children and my students to know, or better yet, to be, as a result of their education.

For one thing, I would like them to be awake. There are a number of stupefying things about, however. The sheer force and noise under which we live batters and stuns us into imbecility and torpor. We may test this at any point. Pause, at any random moment of any day, inside or outside, and list the noises that you hear. If there is not a jet plane going overhead, there will be a truck going past. If the television is not going, there will be the roar of the interstate. If you are in a university dormitory you will hear someone's stereo pouring out noise at a shattering decibel level, or if you are in a supermarket you will hear worse, namely the saccharine and treacly lullaby of Muzak. I spend my summers in a place

that, short of sheer wilderness, is as rural as you can get east of the Dakotas. I have counted the following noises that are native to this pastoral countryside where I go: trucks—gravel trucks, oil trucks, and the pick-up trucks of all the local handymen; hot rods, popping and slamming up and down the roads; dirt bikes; chain saws; bulldozers; small aircraft; and worst of all, Air Force jets which maneuver directly over Sugar Hill, New Hampshire, every day starting at exactly 10:40 a.m., and stretching a deafening canopy of sound from horizon to horizon. And that is the *country*. What shall we say of the cities and suburbs where, besides living with far more noise than that, people never turn off the television and the stereo?

I myself have wondered whether television is not a twentieth-century variation on the theme of what we did in the Garden of Eden when we made a grab for a kind of knowledge that we were not made for and that hence turned out to be crushing. It killed us. We were not made to bear the knowledge of good and evil: only gods can bear that and live. We thought we could shoulder it, and it killed us. I wonder if television is not our own special technological variation on this theme. For what does it do? It pours avalanches of data at us with a force and speed that can only destroy us psychologically, morally, emotionally, and spiritually. We mortal creatures were not made to bear the instant, vivid, and gigantic spectacle of chaos and suffering and strife in every corner of the world. If we think we can, then we are guilty of the sin that we were guilty of originally, namely that we can be as gods. The Greeks called it *hubris*. St. Francis himself could not bear the spectacle, not because his heart did not have enough charity in it, but because he would have known that the poor and the lepers and the hungry he had as his neighbors were a load heavy enough for any mortal charity to bear.

Do I mean, then, that we shut our eyes and our compassion, and lock ourselves away from the suffering of the world? Surely not. But the *spectacle* of universal suffering and chaos pouring into affluent American living rooms hour upon hour every day, year after year, can have only the negative effect of getting us *accustomed* to the spectacle. We get calloused. Our threshold of shockability goes up and up until we are blasé. The thing that we thought was consciousness-raising turns out to be consciousness-blunting. We turn out to be spectators, like Romans at the arena.

Worse than this, of course, is the *bogus* violence that comes at us in what is called entertainment, where we are glutted still further with violence dished up for its own amusement value: people being blown to bits, guns blazing, knives flashing, cars careening, and marriages breaking down and breaking down on thousands upon thousands of tedious soap-opera afternoons. And, topping all this up, the neanderthal throb of acid, punk, and funk rock, blatting and yelling in our ears, stunning and cudgeling our sensibilities until they are flat, flat, flat.

Does it surprise you, then, that high school students sit in class paralyzed by boredom? That nothing is "relevant" except powerful kicks? How would you go about flagging down their jaded attention with such hot topics as sanctity, grace, courtesy, charity, and all the other accoutrements of civilized life assumed by the Western tradition to be indispensable? How will we keep alive ears that are able to hear Mozart or Shakespeare, or eyes that can see Vermeer or Fra Angelico? How shall I keep alive in my students some rag of grace and agility and tenderness—some quality of being awake to the texture and fragility of life; some capacity to adore what is adorable, and to extol what is praiseworthy, and to recognize nobility, perfection, virtue, and beauty wherever it appears—in a Brandenburg Concerto, or in a Mother Teresa, or even in some Golden Retriever wagging his great plume of a tail at us—or even in someone's bending to pick up a gum wrapper thrown down on campus by one of the barbarians who has not learned what civility, much less sanctity, is?

For another thing, I would like my children and my students to know what courtesy and grace are, and to introduce them to this, I will have to introduce them not only to the ancient Western tradition, but to the particular Christian tradition. It is easy enough to see how impossible a task this is nowadays simply by looking at our own reaction to the words themselves. Courtesy? Grace? The very words make us wince. We think of nineteenth century ladies' finishing schools, and pinkies extended over bone-china cups of Darjeeling tea, and pursed lips being dabbed demurely with lace hankies. What on earth have courtesy and grace to do with anything in this hey-hey, hang-loose era we live in now?

Well, they have something to do with something, I suspect. And that something must be the old worn-out notion of Charity—a notion that no Jew and no Christian can give the back of his hand to, no matter what era he lives in, since Charity was commanded, described, and spelled out in the Law at Sinai, and taught in the Sermon on the Mount, and incarnate and enacted for an example for us forever and ever when the Most High came to visit us.

But what is it supposed to look like now? This is a different epoch, and vastly different demands are going to be made on our graduates. Surely we cannot expect them to be bowing and salaaming their way through life? No; surely not. But will they be truly educated if they have not seen what it meant to honor the other person, and to be kind and generous, even in the smallest exchanges of ordinary life? What was moral theology about? What were all the books, written with such earnestness by the Renaissance Christian humanists, spelling out what the virtuous man was to be? Indeed, what was the ideal for all of education in the Renaissance? Virtue was a very big word in that educational scheme. I would like to cultivate, and to see, in my students some alertness to other people—some quick and

thoughtful courtesy that is finely-tuned to people who need help, whether it is simply a matter of quickly and unobtrusively offering a chair to a lady who comes into the room, or giving someone a hand with a bag of groceries, or sitting up for hours with someone who is going through some dark night of the soul. And, it may be another index of how difficult a task this is going to be for you and me when we hear shrill and angry voices telling us now that that old business of offering a chair to a lady—indeed, that the word “lady” itself—is an insult to modern womanhood because it implies that women are the weaker sex and are therefore to be coddled. Alas. What on earth does that fierce, political frame of mind know about the ancient business of offering honor to something that is honorable? What do they know of the grave and joyous courtesies exchanged between our great lord and father Adam and our great lady and mother Eve? Do we think *they* scrabbled at each other for equal time, and droned away at committee tables making sure no gesture or phrase implied any inequality? Politics, and justice in the public domain, may have to grind away at that gritty business: but love, and hence grace and courtesy, know nothing of that calculating and squinting approach.

An Institute for Christian Studies will have as at least part of its mandate the rooting of this vision of things in a soil deeper than what we might find in the nineteenth century finishing school. Courtesy reaches further than the parlor: it is, eventually, theological, and there is a massive tradition that has been set on one side in the curricular planning at most institutions of higher learning in our own epoch. It remains to be seen whether in thus setting that tradition aside, our epoch has not set aside the building blocks on which the entire edifice of civilization as we know it rests. I would like my students, and my children, to know of the tradition that honors the exquisite and noble mystery of other selves—something that they will not encounter under the disciplines of the modern behavioral sciences—so that they will abhor all the forms of rudeness and discourtesy and self-interest by which we brutalize each other these days—all the forms, I say, from the lechery that calls itself free love and that has long since forgotten the mystery of the other self in its hot pursuit of bliss, to the slogans that reduce us all to frightened and angry pawns in a wearying game of egalitarian chess.

Third, I would like to keep alive in my students and in my children the capacity for contentment—nay, for delight in the utterly ordinary. This is not going to be easy. It is the sort of thing one might encounter in such non-best-selling writers as Saint Benedict and Brother Lawrence. It is going to be difficult because we and our students and our children are told, in a thousand talk shows and a thousand books, and in every journal and seminar, and in every magazine and advertisement, that what we want is something *else*. If you drive a Pinto, what you want is a BMW; if you drive a BMW, what

you want is a Mercedes. If you shop at K Mart, you need to move up to Bergdorf and Niemann Marcus. If you go to Aspen for your holiday, you ought to try St. Moritz. If you are a mother, you ought to be an investment banker. If you work from nine to five, that is a drag and only dull people do that. If you are middle class, you need to get emancipated. Upward mobility. Self-actualization. Self-assertion. Self-discovery. Self-realization. Aggression. Kicks. Travel. Diversion. The Beautiful People. Radical chic. Anywhere but where we are, nothing could be as dull as this.

How shall we preserve the capacity for contentment and delight in sheer, unvarnished ordinariness and routine, when this is the mythology coming at us so dazzlingly? To have caviar and smoked salmon dangled in front of my nose all the time has the effect of making me sooner or later think that the brown bread and butter on my plate is a bore, and that to be happy I must somehow get hold of caviar and smoked salmon for my daily fare. But caviar and smoked salmon are not the staff of life. They are wonderful garnishings, but precious few of us mortal creatures get them very often. The Caribbean is there, heaven knows, and it is beautiful. But have the advertisements for the Caribbean, with willowy women and lithe men draped languidly on the deck of somebody's 90-foot ketch with tall glasses of rum punch, blunted my taste for walking through the woods to the local pond? Madison Avenue is doing what it can to bring this off, and they know how to administer very effective doses of their magic.

Somehow the education we offer has got to have the effect of keeping students in touch with simplicity. What are our demands from life? Is daily routine a form of joy for us, because it gives us the thing that all exiles and prisoners and dying people would give the universe to get back, namely the chance to go about the plain tasks of the day? Or is it a bondage? I must say, when I say goodnight to my children I think to myself, “Well, I have been given a gift of inexpressible worth here, namely one more utterly ordinary day, unmarked by tragedy or sickness or accident.” God forbid that I should neglect to offer up the sacrifice of thanksgiving for this. I don't want to wait until it is taken away before I look at it and assess its value.

I myself am glad that I grew up at the end of the Depression and during the Second World War. Luxuries were just not around then. Or rather, they were, but they were very, very small, and I think that this did something good for us. I can remember my father taking his pocket pen knife and ever so carefully cutting a Milky Way candy bar into about five pieces for some of us children, and passing the little bits out. This was a great treat. We loved it. We did not feel deprived. The idea of eating an entire candy bar was something I never heard of until I was an adult. My children have more than one piece of Milky Way. So do I. So do you. Have we still got the capacity to delight in one piece of Milky Way? If

not, where are we? How much do we want? If you think I have strayed once more from the topic at hand, you may recall that the vision of life unfurled for us in the two thousand years of Christian writing, history, liturgy, and art, celebrates some such set of values as this. It is hard to find it in contemporary curricula.

Fourth, I would wish to keep alive in my students and my children the capacity for sheer merriment and joy. Plain laughter. Now that sounds like an obvious thing. But it is a rare capacity nowadays. Real, wholesome merriment lies somewhere in the precincts of sanctity, for it presupposes humility. Pompous people cannot really laugh. Merriment has something to do as well with simplicity—sophisticated people can offer only tinkling, silvery mockery. And it has something to do with purity of heart: lechers and gluttons can only leer. And it has something to do with grace—clods and oafs can only grunt. And it has something to do with charity: egotists are seldom amused. The saints seem to be full of merriment. Perhaps the martyrology ought to be part of the curriculum, not in the interest of self-flagellation, but in the interest of learning sheer good health of the soul.

Fifth, and last, I would like my students and children to know something about what a capacity for suffering means. Now this sounds morbid—sadistic even. What shall I do? Shall I thrash them over their Latin paradigms, or make them sleep on the floor, or feed them on hardtack and water in order to steel them against adversity? No. No, no, no. But somewhere in there I want to be giving them whatever it is that will make them strong and good, and that will supply them with the sort of resources that can be drawn on when adversity comes. Surely this, too, has something to do with charity—with one's focus being on something other than oneself. If my whole approach to life is to have my own self affirmed, and to indulge my own preferences and whims and inclinations, then when something (sickness, or grief, or trouble) comes at me, where am I going to be? Whereas if I have been learning the disciplines of life—learning what vigil means, and fasting perhaps, and renunciation—then somehow the sinews of my soul will have been toughened. Not, again, that I intend to try making my children kneel on a stone floor somewhere all night in order to teach them what vigil is all about. But can I, somehow, instil in them the habit of watchful-

ness, and of self-discipline, and of a keen interest in the welfare of others, so that there is hardier material making up the citadel of their souls than the soft mud of indulgence and egocentrism, which will surely be swept away at the first wave of trouble? I used to know an old woman who had everything against her: she was a widow, and she was poor, and she had to work. She had an ungrateful wretch of a son. She was stone deaf. And she had all sorts of arthritis and rheumatism. But that woman was and remains (she is long since in Paradise) for me and my whole family probably the most glittering example of sheer, simple joy and contentedness than any of us has ever seen. Again, five or six years ago I visited a church in Connecticut. In the middle of the Eucharistic liturgy, when the whole congregation was kneeling and singing the "Alleluia," I saw a woman near me with her hands lifted in praise. The thing was, those hands were terribly twisted and gnarled, and she had a pair of crutches near her. "Dear Christ," I thought, "what makes Christians sing 'Alleluia'?" Clearly there was something besides self-interest welling up from that woman in that act of praise.

By this time it will have appeared that I have taken leave of my topic altogether, and sailed off into a homily on the spiritual life. But I would like to protest that when we think of an Institute for Christian Studies and of all that this implies—of rigorous study in the Fathers, and in the doctors of the Church, and in Church history with all of its thousand faces, from the court of the Borgia popes to little Muggle-tonian conventicles meeting in thickets, and from huge Athanasian controversies in the fourth century to Christian attitudes toward the pill and abortion now—what does it all come to? Why is it important? Surely every question that arises finds its source in the basic questions of good and evil. What is good? What is evil? How can you know which is which? What is fixed and what is transitory? Does Christianity judge the age, or does the age judge the ancient Faith? *Securus judicat orbis terrarum*, said St. Augustine, and Cardinal Newman quoted him. It is to be hoped that the scholars who find themselves in the halls of this Institute will find themselves at the fountainhead of real wisdom—the wisdom which Solomon said was worth selling all that a man has in order to gain.